

John Clifford leading worship with Glasgow Unitarians on 21 July 2013

REFLECTIONS on heaven and hell - what motivates us?

I'm sure that none of us here today think of heaven and hell as real locations, places that can be visited distinctly from where we are now. If I am wrong, please accept my apologies and bear with me for a while. I believe the concepts of heaven and hell can be useful without an underlying reality to support them but this depends on how easily these concepts fit into our primary world view.

For many people today heaven and hell are real locations that are destination points at the end of life. The fact that no one has visited these places and returned to tell of it doesn't shake the certainty of their beliefs. But religion is not all about belief, it is about how we live our lives; and I've not seen any reliable scientific research that ties abstract beliefs to life actions - otherwise one could expect all those who believe in hell to be honest and trustworthy. We all know how ridiculous that idea is.....

Even for those who believe in a life after death based on Judgement followed by Reward or Punishment, "heaven" and "hell" are words often used metaphorically to refer to conditions of this existence: equivalents to beauty/happiness/bliss on the one hand or pain/torture/disintegration on the other hand. In other words, heaven and hell move from being names of locations to being names of conditions. If the worst we can experience or imagine leads to a notion of "hell" and the best we can experience or imagine leads to a notion of "heaven" then these become situations to either avoid or to seek. This was indicated in a personal way to me on a fridge magnet I saw years ago: "If you can't be a good example to follow, be a terrible warning of what to avoid."

In the mid-19th Century a famous Universalist minister, Thomas Starr King, accepted a call to a Californian Unitarian Church, much to the bemusement of his friends and colleagues in the Universalist Church. His response has become a classic quote within American liberal religion: "Universalists believe that God is too good to condemn Men [sic] while Unitarians believe that Men [sic] are too good to be condemned."

Many of you will know that I went to University in Arizona (many years ago) and that Arizona is hot, particularly in summer. This summer it has been particularly hot. It was said that ministers of all denominations in Tucson churches had a really rough time because the winters were so good that heaven held no attraction and the summers were so hot that hell held no fear.

And if we're reflecting on motivation, the classical carrot or stick question to doing what's good, these are the Mother of all motivators, aren't they? Apparently, according to the news reports, the new Pope is motivating believers by granting relief from the suffering of purgatory in the next life for those who follow him on twitter in this life!?!....

Personally, I seldom find black/white distinctions useful in practice. Reality for me is more polar, an excellent icon for which is the yin/yang symbol from Taoist philosophy, to be found on the back page of the service sheet. So in everything I say today, please keep this in mind. Even heaven and hell can be seen as two

poles with infinite gradations between them and as the Taoists say, even the pure yin has a spot of yang at its centre and v.v.

Maybe we all need both a carrot and a stick. As Alastair pointed out last week, the future looks pretty bleak unless we radically change the direction we are going - water shortages will cause mass migrations and resource wars. Ecologists have tried to move us by visions of a life lived in harmony with nature but even they present us with visions of a polluted and dead world as something to avoid by changing our habits and preferences now before it is too late.

Government seeks to regulate our behaviour through carrots and sticks, and some of the sticks are rather horrendous, indeed. Think of cigarette packaging with warning messages, TV commercials showing tumours, and the denial of legitimacy to messages that smoking makes you sexier, manlier, or otherwise an attractive person.

What does primarily motivate us? In particular, why do we come to church? Why do many of us volunteer for extra responsibilities whether serving on Committee or helping close up or setting out the cups and saucers. Most of us were not raised in a tradition that threatened us with purgatory or hell if we miss a service and in any case we're no longer in that environment. What does motivate us to identify as a Unitarian or Earth-Centered or Christian or Pagan or whatever else? Most of us don't like being labelled by others but equally, most of us will willingly choose our own labels and then, being Unitarians, spend hours explaining what it means....

So this is your turn to share briefly with us why you come to church - to promote a good in your life or to avoid an evil. Both are necessary but take a few sentences to share your motivation with the rest of us.

[about 8 comments made by congregation]

Thank you to everyone who shared their motivations with us.

Our liberal approach is much more concerned with community and how we behave than with beliefs. As some have mentioned, the traditional vocabulary and approach emphasise a mythology borrowed from pre-Christian religions - Mithraism and Zoroastrians. These have, however, been adopted and incorporated into Christianity by the leading theologians, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas of Aquinas, who both reshaped the thinking of the Christian community, adopting the pre-Christian ideas and reshaping them. Unitarians have never accepted the basic premise implied in original sin that we are fallen, i.e. that there was once a time when things were perfect but we have fallen and therefore need outside intervention because we cannot save ourselves. We recognise our fallibility but believe in progress.

When it comes to motivation, one of the great thinkers was Maslow. The triangle on the back page of the service sheet illustrates his early thinking about why we do things. He describes a hierarchy of needs wherein one generally progresses from the most basic physical needs to more complex social needs. Actually the triangle illustrated does not include a goal he added later: "self-transcendence". As one develops, one expands to the point one actually transcends one's self.

Before I close, a few thoughts about why motivations are so important.

The Reading was about the most popular Covenant in the Unitarian and Universalist communities for several decades of the 19th and 20th centuries. A covenant is a mutual promise about intentions regarding how our community operates, not a credo of what the community believes. It is our promises to each other that create the kind of community that demonstrates tolerance and good-will needed for healing and growth.

Speaking personally, I come with a particular history and concerns but I'm also aware that my experience is limited and I need the experience and challenges of others to help me grow in sensitivity and the ability to be a force for healing. So one of the main motivations I have in coming to church is to get help in the sharing process. I contribute but I also benefit.

I believe it was Paul Tillich who described "Philosophy" as "Ultimate Concern", the drilling down to deeper insights than those available to surface explorations. His contemporary, Henry Nelson Wieman, pointed out that "Religion" was "Ultimate Commitment". A matter not of knowledge but personal decision. Church membership is about commitment. No one can tell us individually the best way to express or develop our commitment, but the church community as a value-commitment-community is the environment that helps and guides us in our efforts.

So, actually, the title of the sermon today was a bit of a catch-all to get a conversation started. Avoiding evil and promoting good are both necessary and calling evil-avoidance "negative" is not to say this is bad. We need to do both, but the mixture for each of us and for our several situations is something we need to think about. Consider Plato - and I recently came across a lovely translation to Plato into Chinese which you will find on the inside of the service sheet. Plato was asked how you could force good leaders to serve and his answer was that force was not useful - good leaders would realise that if they didn't lead, someone with less talent would step up and the good leader would have to endure their leadership. Carrot or stick? Positive or negative?

I close with what is effectively a political observation: The "class struggle" can be overstated but it is undoubtedly true that those with power and wealth tend to think that those below them are best motivated by the stick while they and their "kind" are best motivated by the carrot. The result is that the rich eat lots of carrots while the poor are beaten by lots of sticks.

Amen

The Covenant referred to in the Reading:

*Love is the Doctrine of this Church,
The quest for truth is its Sacrament,
And service is its Prayer.*

*To dwell together in Peace,
To seek knowledge in Freedom,
To serve mankind in Fellowship,*

To the end that all souls shall grow into harmony with the Divine,

Thus do we Covenant with each other and with our God.

